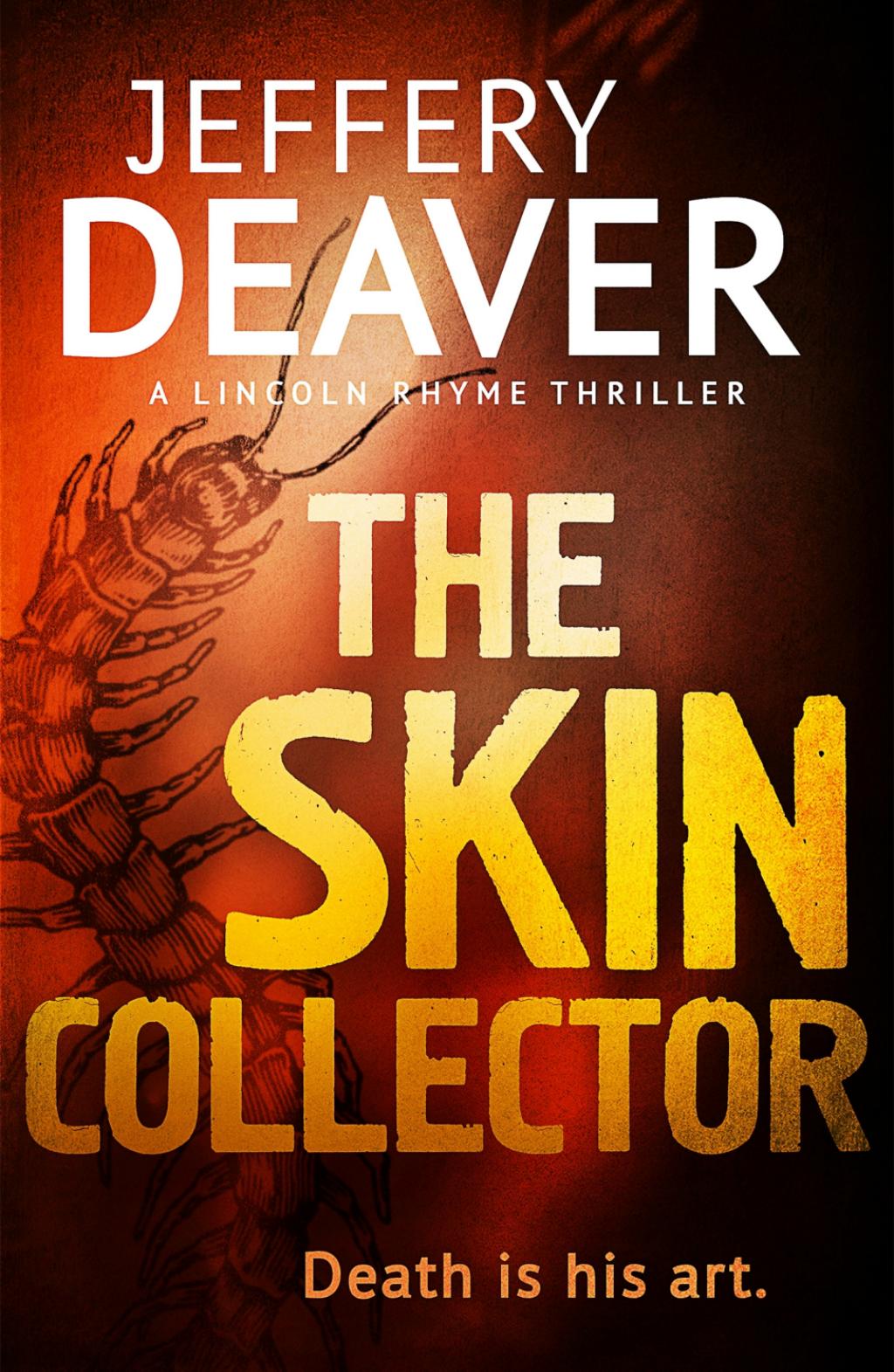


JEFFERY  
DEAVER

A LINCOLN RHYME THRILLER



THE  
SKIN  
COLLECTOR

Death is his art.

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# CHAPTER 1

The basement.

She had to go to the basement.

Chloe hated it down there.

But they'd sold out of sizes ten and twelve Rue du Cannes – the tacky little floral number with scalloped hemline and plunging front – and she needed to replenish the racks, fill 'em up for the grazers. Chloe was an actress, not a retail fashion expert, and new to the store. So she hadn't fathomed why, in a November impersonating January, these particular dresses were selling out. Until her boss explained that, even though the store was in alternative SoHo in Manhattan, the ZIP codes of the purchasers situated them in Jersey, Westchester and Long Island.

'And?'

'Cruises, Chloe. Cruises.'

'Ah.'

Chloe Moore walked into the back of the store. Here the shop was the opposite of the sales floor and about as chic as a storage unit. She found the key among those dangling from her wrist and unlocked the basement door. She flicked on the lights and studied the unsteady stairs.

A sigh and she started down. The door, on a spring, swung shut behind her. Not a small woman, Chloe took the steps carefully. She was also on Vera Wang knockoffs. Pseudo-designer heels and hundred-year-old architecture can be a dangerous combination.

The basement.

Hated it.

Not that she worried about intruders. There was only one door in and out – the one she'd just come through. But the place was moldy, damp, cold . . . and booby-trapped with cobwebs.

Which meant sly, predatory spiders.

And Chloe knew she'd need a dog roller to remove the dust from the dark-green skirt and black blouse (Le Bordeaux and La Seine).

She stepped onto the uneven, cracked concrete floor, moving to the left to avoid a big web. But another one got her; a long clinging strand clutched her face, tickling. After a comic dance of trying to brush the damn thing off and not fall over, she continued her search. Five minutes later she found the shipments of Rue du Cannes, which may have looked French and sounded French but came in boxes printed largely with Chinese characters.

As she tugged the cartons off the shelf Chloe heard a scrape. She froze. Tilted her head.

The sound didn't repeat. But then she was aware of another noise.

*Drip, drip, drip.*

Was there a leak?

Chloe came down here often, if reluctantly, and she'd never heard water. She stacked the faux French garments near the stairs and turned to investigate. Most of the inventory was on shelves but some cartons rested on the floor. A leak could be disastrous. And while, yes, Chloe was eventually headed for Broadway she nonetheless needed to keep her job here at Chez Nord for the foreseeable future. Stopping a leak before it ruined ten thousand dollars' worth of overpriced clothes might go a long way in keeping those paychecks dribbling into Chase.

She walked to the back of the cellar, determined to find the leak, though also on serious spider alert.

The dripping grew louder as she moved toward the rear of the room, even murkier than the front, near the stairs.

Chloe stepped behind a shelf, containing a huge supply of blouses so ugly even her mother wouldn't wear them – a major order by a buyer who, Chloe believed, had made the purchase because he knew he was going to be sacked.

*Drip, drip . . .*

Squinting.

Odd. What was that? In the far wall an access door was open. The sound of water was coming from there. The door, painted gray like the walls, was about three feet by four.

What did it lead to? Was there a sub-basement? She'd never seen the doorway but then she didn't believe she'd ever glanced at the wall behind the last shelf. There was no reason to.

And why was it open? The city was always doing construction work, especially in the older parts, such as here, SoHo. But nobody had talked to the clerks – her, at least – about a repair beneath the building.

Maybe that weird Polish or Rumanian or Russian janitor was doing some repairs. But, no, couldn't be. The manager didn't trust him; he didn't have keys to the basement door.

Okay, the creep factor was rising.

Don't bother figuring it out. Tell Marge about the drip. Tell her about the open doorway. Get Vlad or Mikhail or whoever he is down here and let him earn his salary.

Then another scrape. This time it seemed to be a foot shifting on gritty concrete.

Fuck. That's it. Get. Out.

But before she got out, before she even spun an eighth turn away, he was on her from behind, slamming her head into the wall. He pressed a cloth over her mouth to gag her. She nearly fainted from the shock. A burst of pain blossomed in her neck.

Chloe turned fast to face him.

God, God . . .

She nearly puked, seeing the yellowish latex full-head mask, with slots for eyes and mouth and ears, tight and distorting the flesh underneath, as if his face had melted. He was in worker's coveralls, some logo on them she couldn't read.

Crying, shaking her head, she was pleading through the gag, screaming through the gag, which he kept pressed firmly in place with a hand in a glove as tight and sickly yellow as the mask.

'Listen to me, please! Don't do this! You don't understand! Listen, listen . . .' But the words were just random sounds through the cloth.

Thinking: Why didn't I chock the door open? I thought about it . . . Furious with herself.

His calm eyes looked her over – but not her breasts or lips or hips or legs. Just the skin of her bare arms, her throat, her neck, where he focused intently on a small blue tattoo of a tulip.

'Not bad, not good,' he whispered.

She was whimpering, shivering, moaning. 'What, what, what do you want?'

But why did she even ask? She knew. Of course she knew.

And, with that thought, Chloe controlled the fear. She tightened her heart.

Okay, asshole, wanna play? You'll pay.

She went limp. His eyes, surrounded by yellow latex like sickly skin, seemed confused. The attacker, apparently not expecting her collapse, adjusted his grip to keep her from falling.

As soon as she felt his hands slacken Chloe lunged forward and grabbed the collar of his coveralls. The zipper popped and cloth tore – both the outer garment and whatever was under it.

Her grip and the blows aimed at his chest and face were fierce. She pumped her knee upward toward his groin. Again and once more.

But she didn't connect. Her aim was off. It seemed such an easy target but she was suddenly uncoordinated, dizzy. He was cutting off her air with the gag – that was it maybe. Or the aftermath of the shock.

Keep going, she raged. Don't stop. He's scared. You can see it. Fucking coward . . .

And tried to hit him again, claw at his flesh, but she now found her energy fading fast. Her hands tapped uselessly against him. Her head lolled and, looking down, she noticed that his sleeve had ridden up. Chloe caught sight of a weird tattoo, in red, some insect, dozens of little insect legs, insect fangs but human eyes. And then she focused on the floor of the cellar. A glint from the hypodermic syringe. *That* was the source of the pain in her neck – and of her fleeing strength. He'd injected her with something.

Whatever the drug, it was taking effect in a big way. She was growing exhausted. Her mind tumbled, as if dipping into and

out of a dream, and for some reason she found herself obsessing over the cheap perfume Chez Nord sold by the checkout counter.

Who'd buy that crap? Why didn't—?

What am I doing? she thought as clarity returned. Fight! Fight the son of a bitch!

But her hands were at her sides now, completely still, and her head heavy as stone.

She was sitting on the floor and then the room tilted and began to move. He was dragging her toward the access door.

No, not there, please!

Listen to me! I can explain why you shouldn't do this. Don't take me there! Listen!

Here in the cellar proper, at least there was still some hope that Marge would look down the stairs and see them both and she'd scream and he'd scramble off on his insect legs. But once Chloe was deep underground in his bug nest, it would be too late. The room was growing dark but an odd kind of dark, as if the ceiling bulbs, which were still on, were not *emitting* light but drawing in rays and extinguishing them.

Fight!

But she couldn't.

Closer to the black abyss.

*Drip, drip, drip . . .*

Scream!

She did.

But no sound came from her mouth beyond a hiss, a cricket click, a beetle hum.

Then he was easing her through the door into Wonderland, on the other side. Like that movie. Or cartoon. Or whatever.

She saw a small utility room below.

Chloe believed she was falling, over and over, and a moment later she was on the floor, the ground, the dirt, trying to breathe, the air kicked out of her lungs from the impact. But no pain, no pain at all. The sound of dripping water was more pronounced and she saw a trickle down the far wall, made of old stone and laced with pipes and wires, rusty and frayed and rotting.

*Drip, drip . . .*

A trickle of insect venom, of shiny clear insect blood.

Thinking, Alice, I'm Alice. Down the rabbit hole. The hookah-smoking caterpillar, the March Hare, the Red Queen, the red insect on his arm.

She never liked that goddamn story!

Chloe gave up on screaming. She wanted only to crawl away, to cry and huddle, to be left alone. But she couldn't move. She lay on her back, staring up at the faint light from the basement of the store that she hated working in, the store that she wanted with all her soul to be back inside right now, standing on sore feet and nodding with fake enthusiasm.

No, no, it makes you look sooo thin. Really . . .

Then the light grew dimmer yet as her attacker, the yellow-face insect, climbed into the hole, pulled the access door shut behind him, and came down the short ladder to where she lay. A moment later a piercing light filled the tunnel; he'd pulled a miner's lamp onto his forehead, clicked it on. The white beam blinded and she screamed, or didn't scream, at the piercing brilliance.

Which suddenly faded to complete darkness.

She awoke a few seconds or minutes or a year later.

Chloe was someplace else now, not the utility room, but in a larger room, no, a tunnel. Hard to see, since the only illumination was a weak light above her and the focused beam from the masked insect man's forehead. It blinded her every time he looked at her face. She was on her back again, staring upward, and he was kneeling over her.

But what she'd been expecting, dreading, wasn't happening. In a way, though, this was worse because *that* – ripping her clothes off and then what would follow – would at least have been understandable. It would have fallen into a known category of horror.

This was different.

Yes, her blouse was tugged up but only slightly, exposing her belly from navel to the bottom of her bra, which was still chastely in place. Her skirt was tucked tight around her thighs, almost as if he didn't want there to be any suggestion of impropriety.

Leaning forward, hunched, intent, he was staring with those calm eyes of his, those insect eyes, at her smooth, white belly skin the way somebody would look over a canvas at MoMA: head tilted, getting the right angle to appreciate Jackson Pollock's spatter, Magritte's green apple.

He then slowly extended his index finger and stroked her flesh. His yellow finger. He splayed his palm and brushed back and forth. He pinched and raised peaks of skin between his thumb and forefinger. He let go and watched the mounds flatten back.

His insect mouth curved into a faint smile.

She thought he said, 'Very nice.' Or maybe that was the smoking caterpillar talking or the bug on his arm.

She heard a faint hum of vibration and he looked at his watch. Another hum, from elsewhere. Then he glanced at her face and saw her eyes. He seemed surprised, maybe, that she was awake. Turning, he tugged into view a backpack and removed from it a filled hypodermic syringe. He stabbed her again, this time in a vein in her arm.

The warmth flowed, the fear lessened. As darkness trickled around her, sounds vanishing, she saw his yellow fingers, his caterpillar fingers, his insect claws, reach into the backpack once more and carefully remove a small box. He set it beside her exposed skin with the same reverence she remembered her priest displaying as he'd placed the silver vessel holding the blood of Christ on the altar last Sunday during Holy Communion.

## CHAPTER 2

Billy Haven shut off his American Eagle tattoo machine to save the batteries.

He squatted back. He examined the work so far.

Eyes scanning.

Less-than-ideal conditions but the art was good.

You always put everything you could into your mods. From the simplest cross on a waitress's shoulder to an American flag on a contractor's chest, complete with multiple folds and three colors and blowin' in the wind, you inked like Michelangelo laboring away on the church ceiling. God and Adam, finger skin to finger skin.

Now, here, Billy could've rushed. Considering the circumstances, nobody would have blamed him.

But no. The mod had to be a Billy Mod. What they called it back home, in his shop.

He felt a tickle, sweat.

Lifted the dentist's face guard and with his gloved hand wiped sweat from his eyes, put the tissue into a pocket. Carefully, so no fibers would flake off. Telltale fibers that could be as dangerous to him as the inking was to Chloe.

The face shield was cumbersome. But necessary. His tattoo instructor had taught him this lesson. He'd had Billy slip one on before the boy had even picked up a machine for the first time. Billy, like most young apprentices, had protested: Got eye protection. Don't need more. It wasn't cool. Wearing a dorky mask was like giving newbies, in for their first inking, a pussy ball to squeeze.

Tat up. Get over it.

But then his instructor had Billy sit beside him while he inked a client. A little work: Ozzy Osbourne's face. For some reason.

Man, the blood and fluid that spattered! The face guard was as flecked as a pickup's windshield in August.

'Be smart, Billy. Remember.'

'Sure.'

Ever since, he'd assumed that each customer was ripe with hep C and B and HIV and whatever other sexual diseases were popular.

And for the mods he'd be inking over the next few days, of course, he couldn't afford *any* blowback.

So, protection.

And he'd worn the latex mask and hood, too, to make sure he didn't shed any of his abundant hair or slough off epidermal cells. To distort his features as well. There was the remote chance that, despite his careful selection of the secluded kill zones, he'd get spotted.

Billy Haven now examined his victim again.

Chloe.

He'd noted the name on the tag on her chest and the pretentious *Je m'appelle* preceding it. Whatever that meant. Maybe Hello. Maybe Good morning. French. He lowered his gloved hand – double-gloved – and stroked her skin, pinching, stretching, noting the elasticity, the texture, the fine resilience.

Billy noted too the faint rise between her legs, beneath the forest-green skirt. The lower line of the bra. But there was no question of misbehaving. He never touched a client anywhere he shouldn't touch.

That was flesh. This was skin. Two different things entirely, and it was skin that Billy Haven loved.

He wiped more sweat with a new tissue, carefully tucked it away again. He was hot, his own skin prickling. Though the month was November the tunnel was stifling. Long – about a hundred yards – yet sealed at both ends, which meant no ventilation. It was like many of the passages here in SoHo, south of Greenwich Village. Built in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, these tunnels honeycombed the neighborhood and had been used for transporting goods underground to and from factories and warehouses and transfer stations.

Abandoned now, they were perfect for Billy's purposes.

The watch on his right wrist hummed again. A similar sound from a backup watch in his pocket came a few seconds later. Reminding him of the time; Billy often got lost in his work.

Just let me get God's knuckle perfect, just a minute more . . .

A clattering came from a bud microphone in his left ear. He listened for a moment then ignored the noise and took up the American Eagle machine once more. It was an old-style model, with a rotary head, which moved the needle like a sewing machine's, rather than modern devices that used a vibrating coil.

He clicked it on.

*Bzzzz . . .*

Face shield down.

A millimeter at a time, he inked with a lining needle, following the bloodline he'd done quickly. Billy was a natural-born artist, brilliant at pencil and ink drawing, brilliant at pastels. Brilliant at needles. He drew freehand on paper, he drew freehand on skin. Most mod artists, however talented, used stencils, prepared ahead of time or – for the untalented – purchased and then placed on the skin for the inker to trace. Billy rarely did this. He didn't need to. From God's mind to your hand, his uncle had said.

Now time to fill. He swapped needles. Very, very carefully.

For Chloe's tat, Billy was using the famous Blackletter font, known more commonly as Gothic or Old English. It was characterized by very thick and very thin strokes. The particular family he used was Fraktur. He'd selected this font because it was the typeface of the Gutenberg Bible – and because it was challenging. He was an artist and what artist didn't like to show off his skills?

Ten minutes later he was nearly done.

And how was his client doing? He scanned her body then lifted her lids. Eyes still unfocused. Her face gave a few twitches, though. The propofol wouldn't last much longer. But of course by now one drug was replacing the other.

Suddenly pain coursed through his chest. This alarmed him.

He was young and in very good shape; he dismissed the thought of a heart attack. But the big question remained: Had he inhaled something he shouldn't have?

*That* was a very real, and lethal, possibility.

Then he probed his own body and realized the pain was on the surface. And he understood. When he'd first grabbed her, Chloe had fought back. He'd been so charged he hadn't noticed how hard she'd struck him. But now the adrenaline had worn off and the pain was throbbing. He looked down. Hadn't caused any serious damage, except for tearing his shirt and the coveralls.

He ignored the ache and kept going.

Then Billy noted Chloe's breathing becoming deeper. The anesthetic would soon wear off. He touched her chest – Lovely Girl wouldn't have minded – and beneath his hand he could feel her heartbeat thudding more insistently.

It was then that a thought occurred to him: What would it be like to tattoo a living, beating heart? Could it be done? Billy had broken into a medical supply company a month ago in anticipation of his plans here in New York. He'd made off with thousands of dollars in equipment, drugs, chemicals and other materials. He wondered if he could learn enough to put someone under, crack open the chest, ink a design or words onto the heart itself and sew the victim back up. Living out his or her life with the altered organ.

What would the work be?

A cross.

The words: *The Rule of Skin*

Maybe:

*Billy + Lovely Girl 4 Ever*

Interesting idea. But thinking about Lovely Girl made him sad and he returned to Chloe, finishing the last of the letters.

Good.

A Billy Mod.

But not quite finished yet. He extracted a scalpel from a dark-green toothbrush container and reached forward, stretching out the marvelous skin once more.

# CHAPTER 3

One can view death in two ways.

In the discipline of forensic science an investigator looks at death abstractly, considers it to be merely an event that gives rise to a series of tasks. Good forensic cops view that event as if through the lens of history; the best see death as fiction, and the victim as someone who never existed at all.

Detachment is a necessary tool for crime scene work, just like latex gloves and alternative light sources.

As he sat in the red-and-gray Merits wheelchair in front of the window of his Central Park West town house, Lincoln Rhyme happened to be thinking of a recent death in just this way. Last week a man had been murdered downtown, a mugging gone wrong. Just after leaving his office in the city's Department of Environmental Protection, mid-evening, he'd been pulled into a deserted construction site across the street. Rather than give up his wallet, he'd chosen to fight and, no match for the perp, he'd been stabbed to death.

The case, whose file sat in front of him now, was mundane, and the sparse evidence typical of such a murder: a cheap weapon, a serrated-edge kitchen knife, dotted with fingerprints not on file at IAFIS or anywhere else, indistinct footprints in the slush that had coated the ground that night, and no trace or trash or cigarette butts that weren't day- or week-old trace or trash or cigarette butts. And therefore useless. To all appearances it was a random crime; there were no springboards to likely perps. The officers had interviewed the victim's fellow employees in the public works department and talked to friends and family. There'd been no drug connections, no dicey business deals, no jealous lovers, no jealous spouses of lovers.

Given the paltry evidence, the case, Rhyme knew, would be

solved only one way: Someone would carelessly boast about scoring a wallet near City Hall. And the boastee, collared for drugs or domestic abuse or petty larceny, would cut a deal by giving up the boaster.

This crime, a mugging gone wrong, was death observed from a distance, to Lincoln Rhyme. Historical. Fictional.

View number one.

The second way to regard death is from the heart: when a human being with whom you have a true connection is no longer of this earth. And the other death on Rhyme's mind on this blustery, grim day was affecting him as deeply as the mugging victim's killing was not.

Rhyme wasn't close to many people. This was not a function of his physical condition – he was a quadriplegic, largely paralyzed from the neck down. No, he'd never been a people person. He was a science person. A mind person.

Oh, there'd been a few friends he'd been close to, some relatives, lovers. His wife, now ex.

Thom, his aide.

Amelia Sachs, of course.

But the second man who'd died several days ago had, in one sense, been closer than all of the others, and for this reason: He'd challenged Rhyme like no one else, forced him to think beyond the expansive boundaries where his own mind roamed, forced him to anticipate and strategize and question. Forced him to fight for his life too; the man had come very close to killing him.

The Watchmaker was the most intriguing criminal Rhyme had ever encountered. A man of shifting identities, Richard Logan was primarily a professional killer, though he'd orchestrated an alpha-omega of crimes, from terrorist attacks to robbery. He would work for whoever paid his hefty fee – provided the job was, yes, challenging enough. Which was the same criterion Rhyme used when deciding to take on a case as a consulting forensic scientist.

The Watchmaker was one of the few criminals able to outthink him. Although Rhyme had eventually set the trap that landed Logan in prison he still stung from his failure to stop several

plots that were successful. And even when he failed, the Watchmaker sometimes managed to wreak havoc. In a case in which Rhyme had derailed the attempted killing of a Mexican officer investigating drug cartels, Logan had still provoked an international incident (it was finally agreed to seal the records and pretend the attempted hit had never happened).

But now the Watchmaker was gone.

The man had died in prison – not murdered by a fellow inmate or a suicide, which Rhyme had first suspected upon hearing the news. No, the COD was pedestrian – cardiac arrest, though massive. The doctor, whom Rhyme had spoken to yesterday, reported that even if they'd been able to bring Logan around he would have had permanent and severe brain damage. Though medicos did not use phrases like ‘his death was a blessing,’ that was the impression Rhyme took from the doctor’s tone.

A blast of temperamental November wind shook the windows of Rhyme’s town house. He was in the building’s front parlor – the place in which he felt more comfortable than anywhere else in the world. Created as a Victorian sitting room, it was now a fully decked-out forensic lab, with spotless tables for examining evidence, computers and high-def monitors, racks of instruments, sophisticated equipment like fume and particulate control hoods, latent fingerprint imaging chambers, microscopes – optical and scanning electron – and the centerpiece: a gas chromatograph/mass spectrometer, the workhorse of forensic labs.

Any small- or even medium-sized police department in the country might envy the setup, which had cost millions. All paid for by Rhyme himself. The settlement after the accident on a crime scene rendering him a quad had been quite substantial; so were the fees that he charged the NYPD and other law enforcement agencies that hired him. (There were occasional offers from other sources that might produce revenue, such as Hollywood’s proposals for TV shows based on the cases he’d worked. *The Man in the Chair* was one suggested title. *Rhyme and Reason* another. Thom had translated his boss’s response to these overtures – ‘Are they out of their fucking minds?’ – as, ‘Mr Rhyme has asked me to convey his appreciation for your interest. But

he's afraid he has too many commitments at this point for a project like that.'

Rhyme now turned his chair around and stared at a delicate and beautiful pocket watch sitting in a holder on the mantelpiece. A Breguet. It happened to be a present from the Watchmaker himself.

His mourning was complex and reflected the dual views of death he'd been thinking of. Certainly there were analytical – forensic – reasons to be troubled by the loss. He'd now never be able to probe the man's mind to his satisfaction. As the nickname suggested, Logan was obsessed with time and timepieces – he actually made watches and clocks – and that was how he plotted out his crimes, with painstaking precision. Ever since their paths first crossed, Rhyme had marveled at how Logan's thought processes worked. He even hoped that the man would allow him a prison visit so that they could talk about the chess-match-like crimes he'd planned out.

Logan's death also left some other, practical concerns. The prosecutor had offered Logan a plea bargain, a reduced sentence in exchange for giving up the names of some of the people who'd hired him and whom he'd worked with; the man clearly had an extensive network of criminal colleagues whose identities the police would like to learn. There were rumors too of plots Logan had put together before he'd gone to prison.

But Logan hadn't bought the DA's deal. And, more irritating, he'd pleaded guilty, denying Rhyme another chance to learn more about who he was and to identify his family members and associates. Rhyme had even planned to use facial recognition technology and undercover agents to identify those attending the man's trial.

Ultimately, though, Rhyme understood he was taking the man's demise hard because of the second view of death: that connection between them. We're defined and enlivened by what opposes us. And when the Watchmaker died, Lincoln Rhyme died a bit too.

He looked at the other two people in the room. One was the youngster on Rhyme's team, NYPD patrol officer Ron Pulaski,

who was packing up the evidence in the City Hall mugging/homicide case.

The other was Rhyme's caregiver, Thom Reston, a handsome, slim man, dressed as immaculately as always. Today: dark-brown slacks with an enviable knife-blade crease, a pale-yellow shirt and a zoological tie in greens and browns; the cloth seemed to sport a simian face or two. Hard to tell. Rhyme himself paid little attention to clothing. His black sweats and green long-sleeved sweater were functional and good insulators. That was all he cared about.

'I want to send flowers,' Rhyme now announced.

'Flowers?' Thom asked.

'Yes. Flowers. Send them. People still do that, I assume. Wreaths saying *RIP, Rest in Peace*, though what's the point of that? What else're the dead going to be doing? It's a better message than *Good Luck*, don't you think?'

'Send flowers to . . . Wait. Are you talking about Richard Logan?'

'Of course. Who else has died lately who's flower-worthy?'

Pulaski said, 'Hm, Lincoln. "Flower-worthy." That is not an expression I would ever imagine you saying.'

'Flowers,' Rhyme repeated petulantly. 'Why is this not registering?'

'And why're you in a bad mood?' Thom asked.

'Old married couple' was a phrase that could be used to describe caregiver and charge.

'I'm hardly in a bad mood. I simply want to send flowers to a funeral home. But nobody's doing it. We can get the name from the hospital that did the autopsy. They'll have to send the corpse to a funeral home. Hospitals don't embalm or cremate.'

Pulaski said, 'You know, Lincoln. One way to think about it is: There's some justice. You could say the Watchmaker got the death penalty, after all.'

Blond and determined and eager, Pulaski had the makings of a fine crime scene officer and Rhyme had taken on the job of mentor. Which included not only instruction in forensic science but also getting the kid to use his mind. This he didn't seem to

be doing presently. 'And just how does a random arterial occlusion, rookie, equal justice? If the prosecutor in New York State chose not to seek the death penalty, then you might say that a premature death *undermines* justice. Not furthers it.'

'I—' the young man stammered, blushing Valentine red.

'Now, rookie, let's move on from spurious observations. Flowers. Find out when the body's being released from Westchester Memorial and where it's going. I want the flowers there ASAP, whether there's a service or not. With a card from me.'

'Saying what?'

'Nothing other than my name.'

'Flowers?' Amelia Sachs's voice echoed from the hallway leading to the kitchen and the back door of the town house. She walked into the parlor, nodding greetings.

'Lincoln's going to send flowers to the funeral home. For Richard Logan. I mean, I am.'

She hung her dark jacket on a hook in the hall. She was in close-fitting black jeans, a yellow sweater and a black wool sport coat. The only indication of her rank as a police detective was a Glock riding high on her hip, though the leap from weapon to law enforcer was a tentative deduction at best. To look at the tall, slim redhead – with abundant straight hair – you might guess she was a fashion model. Which she had been, before joining the NYPD.

Sachs walked closer and kissed Rhyme on the lips. She tasted of lipstick and smelled of gunshot residue; she'd been to the range that morning.

Thinking of cosmetics, Rhyme recalled that the victim of the City Hall mugging/murder had shaved just before leaving the office; nearly invisible bits of shave cream and tiny rods of beard had been found adhering to his neck and cheek. He'd also recently sprayed or rubbed on aftershave. In their analysis, while Rhyme had been noting those facts, potentially helpful for the investigation, Sachs had grown still. She'd said, 'So he was going out that night, a date probably – you wouldn't shave for guy friends. You know, Rhyme, if he hadn't spent that last five minutes in the restroom, the timing would've changed. And everything would've

turned out different. He'd've survived the night. And maybe gone on to live a long, full life.'

Or he might've gotten into his car drunk and rammed a bus filled with schoolchildren.

Waste of time, playing the fate game.

View of Death Number One, View of Death Number Two.

'You know the funeral home?' Sachs asked.

'Not yet.'

Not knowing he was about to be arrested, and believing he was minutes away from murdering Rhyme, Logan had made a promise that he would spare Sachs's life. Perhaps this clemency was another of the reasons for Rhyme's mourning the man's death.

Thom nodded to Sachs. 'Coffee? Anything else?'

'Just coffee, thanks.'

'Lincoln?'

The criminalist shook his head.

When the aide returned with the cup, he handed it off to Sachs, who thanked him. While the nerves throughout most of his body were insensate, Rhyme's gustatory cells, aka taste buds, worked just fine and he appreciated that Thom Reston made a very good cup of coffee. No capsules or pre-ground, and the word 'instant' was not in his vocabulary.

With a wry smile the aide said to her, 'So. What do you think of Lincoln's emotional side?'

She warmed her hands around the coffee. 'No, Thom, I think there's method to his sentiment.'

Ah, that's my Sachs. Always thinking. This was one of the reasons he loved her. Their eyes met. Rhyme knew that his smile, minuscule though it was, probably matched hers muscle for muscle.

Sachs continued, 'The Watchmaker was always an enigma. We didn't know much about him – he had California connections was about all. Some distant family we could never track down, no associates. This might be the chance to find people who knew and worked with him – legitimately or in his criminal projects. Right, Rhyme?'

One hundred percent, he reflected.

Rhyme said to Pulaski, 'And when you find out the funeral home, I want you there.'

'Me?'

'Your first undercover assignment.'

'Not first,' he corrected.

'First at a funeral.'

'That's true. Who should I be?'

Rhyme said the first thing that came to his mind. 'Harold Pigeon.'

'Harry Pigeon?'

'I was thinking of birds.' A nod toward the nest of peregrine falcons on Rhyme's window ledge, huddled down against the storm. They tended to nest lower in bad weather.

'Harry Pigeon.' The patrolman was shaking his head. 'No way.'

Sachs laughed. Rhyme grimaced. 'I don't care. Make up your own damn name.'

'Stan Walesa. My mother's father.'

'Perfect.' An impatient look at a box in the corner of the room. 'There. Get one of those.'

'What's that?'

Sachs explained, 'Prepaid mobiles. We keep a half dozen of them here for ops like this.'

The young officer collected one. 'A Nokia. Hm. Flip phone. State of the art.' He said this with consummate sarcasm.

Before he dialed, Sachs said, 'Just be sure to memorize the number first, so if somebody asks for it you don't fumble.'

'Sure. Good.' Pulaski used the prepaid to call his personal phone and noted the number then stepped away to make the call.

Sachs and Rhyme turned to the crime scene report on the City Hall mugging case and made some edits.

A moment later Pulaski returned. 'The hospital said they're waiting to hear about where to send the body. The morgue director said he's expecting a call in the next few hours.'

Rhyme looked him over. 'You up for this?'

'I suppose. Sure.'

'If there's a service, you'll go. If not, you'll get to the funeral home at the same time as whoever's picking up the remains. The flowers from me'll be there. Now, *that'll* be a conversation starter – the man Richard Logan tried to kill and who put him in jail sends flowers to his funeral.'

'Who's Walesa supposed to be?'

'An associate of Logan's. Exactly who, I'm not sure. I'll have to think it through. But it should be somebody inscrutable, dangerous.' He scowled. 'I wish you didn't look like an altar boy. Were you one?'

'My brother and I both.'

'Well, practice looking scruffy.'

'Don't forget dangerous,' Sachs said, 'though that's going to be tougher than inscrutable.'

Thom brought Rhyme some coffee in a straw-fitted cup. Apparently the aide had noticed him glancing at Sachs's. Rhyme thanked him with a nod.

Old married couple . . .

Thom said, 'I feel better now, Lincoln. For a minute I really did think I was seeing a soft side. It was disorienting. But knowing that you're just setting up a sting to spy on the family of a corpse? It's restored my faith in you.'

Rhyme grumbled, 'It's simply logical. You know, I'm really not the cold fish everyone thinks I am.'

Though ironically Rhyme *did* want to send the flowers in part for a sentimental reason: to pay his respects to a worthy adversary. He suspected the Watchmaker would have done the same for him.

Views of Death Number One and Number Two were not, of course, mutually exclusive.

Rhyme then cocked his head.

'What?' Sachs asked.

'What's the temperature?'

'Right around freezing.'

'So there's ice on the steps outside?' Rhyme's town house sported both stairs and a disabled-accessible ramp.

'There was in the back,' she said. 'Front too, I assume.'

‘We’re about to have a visitor, I think.’

Though the evidence was largely anecdotal, Rhyme had come to believe that, after the accident that deprived him of so many sensations, those that survived grew more discerning. Hearing in particular. He’d detected someone crunching up the front steps.

A moment later the buzzer sounded and Thom went to answer it.

The sound and pacing of the footsteps as the visitor entered the hallway and made for the parlor revealed who’d come a-callin’.

‘Lon.’

Detective First-Grade Lon Sellitto turned the corner and strode through the archway, pulling off his Burberry overcoat. It was tan and vivid with the creases that characterized most of Sellitto’s garb, thanks to his portly physique and careless posture. Rhyme wondered why he didn’t stick with dark clothing, which wouldn’t show the rumpling so much. Though once the overcoat was off and tossed over a rattan chair, Rhyme noted that the navy-blue suit displayed its own troubled texture.

‘Bad out there,’ Sellitto muttered. He dusted his thinning gray-black hair, and a few dots of sleet bailed. His eyes followed them down. He’d tracked in muck and ice. ‘Sorry about that.’

Thom said not to worry and brought him a cup of coffee.

‘Bad,’ the detective repeated, toasting his hands on the mug the way Sachs had. Eyes toward the window, on the other side of which, beyond the falcons, you could see sleet and mist and black branches. And little else of Central Park.

Rhyme didn’t get out much and in any event weather meant nothing to him, unless it was a factor in a crime scene.

Or it helped his early warning system detect visitors.

‘It’s pretty much finished,’ Rhyme said, nodding at the City Hall mugging/murder crime scene report.

‘Yeah, yeah, that’s not why I’m here.’ Spoken nearly as one word.

Rhyme’s attention hovered. Sellitto was a senior officer in Major Cases and if he wasn’t here to pick up the report, then maybe something else, something more interesting, was on the horizon. More propitious was that Sellitto had seen a tray of

pastry, homemade by Thom, and had turned away as if the cruelers were invisible. His mission here had to be urgent.

And, therefore, engaging.

‘We got a call, a homicide down in SoHo, Linc. Earlier today. We drew straws and you got picked. Hope you’re free.’

‘How can I get picked if I never drew a straw?’

A sip of coffee. Ignoring Rhyme. ‘It’s a tough one.’

‘I’m listening.’

‘Woman was abducted from the basement of the store where she worked. Some boutique. Killer dragged her through an access door and into a tunnel under the building.’

Rhyme knew that beneath SoHo was a warren of tunnels, dug years ago for transporting goods from one industrial building to another. He’d always believed it was just a matter of time before somebody used the place as a killing zone.

‘Sexual assault?’

‘No, Amelia,’ Sellitto said. ‘The perp’s a tattoo artist, seems. And from what the respondings said a pretty fucking good one. He gave her a tat. Only he didn’t use ink. He used poison.’

Rhyme had been a forensic scientist for many years; his mind often made accurate deductions from scant preliminary details. But inferences work only when the facts presented echo those from the past. This information was unique in Rhyme’s memory and didn’t become a springboard for any theories whatsoever.

‘What was the toxin he used?’

‘They don’t know. This just happened, I was saying. We’re holding the scene.’

‘More, Lon. The design? That he tattooed on her?’

‘It was some words, they said.’

The intrigue factor swelled. ‘Do you know what they were?’

‘The respondings didn’t say. But they told me it looked like only part of a sentence. And you can guess what that means.’

‘He’s going to need more victims,’ Rhyme said, glancing Sachs’s way. ‘So he can send the rest of his message.’